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ABSTRACT

Especially when engaging students in activities on Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, teachers frequently ask questions that, from an educational standpoint, are useless. The most useless of these questions is, "Do you understand?" because comprehension is not a binary process. Understanding has many phases and levels, and a "yes" or "no" response does little to identify areas of possible confusion. Teachers sometimes ask useless questions because they have only a cursory understanding of the subjects they are teaching. It is important for teachers to ascertain student comprehension. Appropriate ways to do this are to have students: (1) summarize key points of the lesson; (2) give their own examples of the important concepts taught; (3) write down questions during instruction and periodically stop to answer them; and (4) follow an outline of the lesson. Other useless questions include: (1) "Is everyone paying attention?" (2) "Can everyone be quiet?" (3) "Is everyone finished?" and (4) "Can we all pay attention now?" Teachers should find alternative ways to maintain classroom order and to ascertain whether students have completed assignments. (JW)

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Reformulating Useless Questions For Classroom Instruction

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Introduction

Asking and answering questions are at the core of the educational process. Questions are essential for stimulating thinking, facilitating instruction, encouraging participation, eliciting facts and for fostering classroom discussion. They are essential for evaluating student progress through a standard curriculum and for providing valuable information about a teacher's instructional performance. For decades educational researchers have studied and documented the effectiveness of classroom questioning strategies (Wittrock, 1986; Kissock & Lyortsuun, 1982; Dillon, 1988). Although questioning is a universal human activity, research confirms that people can develop more effective questioning skills through systematic study, practice and self-assessment (Kissock & Lyortsuun, 1982).

The oral questioning process that takes place during a lesson helps a teacher to judge whether students are ready to progress to new material or if they need additional practice and revision before moving on. **However, there are some questions that are educationally worthless and should not be used during the instructional process!** Teachers routinely ask these **useless questions** in class, often without forethought, disrupting meaningful classroom interaction and causing miscommunication and confusion among students. Useless questions can be spoken at any time but they tend to occur in situations involving many of the cognitive activities identified by Bloom (1956), such as comprehension, application, analysis synthesis and evaluation. Additionally, teachers may ask useless questions to try to establish control when confronted with noisy or errant student behaviour. This article discusses some commonly asked useless questions and provides suggestions for their reformulation or elimination.

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The Most Useless Question

What teacher hasn't at one time or another ended a segment of instruction with the question, "Do you understand?" It is often used as rhetorical statement that punctuates one point or another, although teachers frequently ask it when they think they have said something important. The expected response is usually a loud "yes," indicating a belief that most normal students will get the point after a simple explanation. A positive response signals the teacher to continue the lesson while a negative one can lead to an exchange such as the following:

"Do you understand?"
"No."
"What don't you understand?"
"I don't know."
"Was it this . . . ?"
"No."
"Or this . . . ?"
"I don't know."

Unfortunately, some students are unable to identify why they are confused or what they have learned incorrectly. Embarrassed, a student might say nothing or perhaps repeat a word or phrase remembered from the day's lesson. The student's response will often prompt the teacher to back up or to start the explanation again. The teacher may repeat all or part of the lesson in a louder voice or at a slower pace, hoping that this time the students will "understand" what was formerly unclear. This tactic usually proves to be as ineffective as the first go-round, causing the class to answer "yes" to the inevitable "Do you understand NOW?" This spares them, and the teacher, another senseless repetition. A major cause of this problem is the teacher's assumption about what it means to *understand* something!

What Is Understanding?

After surveying many research studies about learners' misconceptions, Nickerson (1985) concludes that understanding

anything is a complex phenomenon that "is not an all-or-nothing affair; rather it varies in degree and is probably never complete (p. 235)." It is apparent that a medical doctor has a much greater understanding of the human body than does the school nurse, although each has the appropriate level of comprehension for their own job. Indeed, labels such as *novice, initiate, inexperienced, beginner, apprentice, journeyman, intermediate, master* and *expert* readily demonstrate that there are many levels of understanding for any subject. Because understanding is multi-layered it is often difficult to determine at what level a person comprehends something. Some factors that seem to affect understanding include previous knowledge, situational context, subject-matter knowledge and the ability to use analogies (Nickerson, 1985). Therefore, during classroom discourse, a simple "yes" or "no" answer provides little useful information and the question "Do you understand?" becomes useless.

A Contributing Factor To Useless Questions

Although it is not uncommon for students to correctly answer exam questions based upon incomplete or incorrect concepts, it is often their teachers who are guilty of providing inadequate explanations of complex ideas. For example, during a social studies lesson, a primary school teacher explained to the class that day and night are caused by the earth rotating on its axis while *the sun is fixed and unmoving in space.* After being asked if they understood this explanation the class responded affirmatively. The teacher did not learn until later that *the sun, just as the earth, is in constant motion, and it is only in relation to the earth's motion than sun is fixed.* Consequently, the students' understanding of the concept was limited by the teacher's naive comprehension of the solar system and planetary physics. While this example is not earth-shaking it demonstrates how students can develop misconceptions and patterns of misunderstanding when teachers themselves have only a cursory knowledge of the subjects they teach.

Sadly, it is more difficult to reteach or remediate a poorly learned concept than it is to teach it correctly when it is first introduced. Over time poorly learned concepts are likely to resist

change and interfere with the development of new ideas (Engelmann & Engelmann, 1981; Nickerson, 1985). Therefore it behooves teachers to continually broaden their knowledge base, especially in their secondary or tertiary subjects. Concurrently, they should either rephrase "Do you understand?" or refrain from asking it at all.

Reformulating The Useless Question

Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives (1956) to identify a plausible level of response, the following examples demonstrate possible ways to reformulate "Do you understand?"

1. **Comprehension**
   The teacher has explained the official rules for playing field hockey.
   Question: Do you understand class?
   Answer: Everyone shouts "yes."
   Reformulation: What does the rule about high sticking mean when it says . . .?

2. **Application**
   The teacher has presented information about different modes of transportation in Southeast Asia.
   Question: Is that clear?
   Answer: Almost everyone shouts "yes." The few who shout "no" aren't heard.
   Reformulation: If you were travelling from Singapore to Bangkok which way would be the least expensive?

3. **Analysis**
   The class has just had a lesson about dental hygiene.
   Question: Is there anything you don't understand?
   Answer: Almost everyone shouts "yes." Students who don't understand stay silent.
   Reformulation: What do you think are the major problems in keeping our teeth clean?

4. **Synthesis**
   The teacher presents a social studies lesson about the neighbourhood.
   Question: Do you understand this class?
   Answer: Almost everyone shouts "yes," even students who don't understand.
   Reformulation: What are some of the ways that we can solve our littering problems?

5. **Evaluation**
   In a study of agriculture in Singapore the teacher presented information about the use of the toxic chemical DDT.
   Question: Does everybody understand?
   Answer: A few students shout "yes." Students who don't understand stay silent.
   Reformulation: Why should we or shouldn't we continue to use DDT here?

Additional Ways That Teachers Can Check For Student Understanding

1. Ask one or more students to summarize some of the main points of the lesson.

2. Ask students for examples of important concepts that have been taught.

3. Ask students to write down questions during instruction and stop at regular intervals to answer them.

4. Give students an outline to make sure they are following the lesson and check frequently to see if they are using it.

5. At spaced intervals give students an informal, short, true/false quiz or a crossword puzzle to check their progress.

6. Encourage students to provide their own examples for new concepts.

7. Use frequent writing activities such as bubbling, listing and poetry to elicit student responses.

More Useless Questions

Anytime a teacher addresses a class with *can everyone . . . .*, he or she is inviting the majority to shout out an answer that will likely eclipse any minority opinion to the contrary. Teachers often use group questions to gain the class' attention or to establish a starting point for the next segment of instruction. These questions should be avoided because they contribute nothing to good classroom management while often making it more difficult for a teacher to continue the lesson. Some examples of useless management questions, and their possible rephrasings, are as follows:

Question: Is everyone paying attention?
Reformulation: I want to see how many of you are paying attention. Please sit up straight and fold your hands. I like the way that the back row is sitting.

Question: Can everyone be quiet?
Reformulation: NONE. Don't ask if students can be quiet. Develop and use techniques to quiet the class when necessary.

Question: Is everyone finished?
Reformulation: Remember when you are finished you can (do something else). Let me see who is finished. I see that Li's group has finished. I like the way this group has cleaned up.

Question: Can we all pay attention now?
Reformulation: NONE. Don't ask. Develop and use techniques to arouse and maintain student attention. A good well-paced lesson will do more to solve this problem than anything else.

The above questions are meaningless and indicate that the teacher needs to develop a more effective system for classroom management. In every case teachers can either reformulate the question or they use more effective strategies to keep the students engaged and on-task.

Table 1. A summary of some useless questions and their reformulation.

Level of Use	Useless Question and Typical Answer	Possible Reformulation Strategy
Class Management	**Question:** Is everyone paying attention? **Answer:** Everyone shouts out "yes," even if they aren't paying attention.	*Develop and use techniques for creating classroom discipline.* "I'd like to see if all of you are paying attention so please sit up straight and fold your hands. I like the way this group is sitting."
Class Management	**Question:** Can everyone be quiet? Are you ready to start? **Answer:** Everyone shouts out "yes."	*Develop and use techniques for gaining attention and quieting the class. This is especially important for group work.*
Class Management	**Question:** Can everyone hear me? **Answer:** Anyone who shouts out "no," will be drowned out by those who shout "yes."	*Reformulate the question.* "Miss X (at the back), what did I ask you to do?" Then, "Mr. Y (who is a little closer than miss X) Did you hear her? What were the directions again?" Walk around and say the directions from the back or point to written directions.
Class Management	**Question:** Is everyone finished? **Answer:** Anyone who shouts out "no," will be drowned out by those who shout "yes."	*Reformulate the question.* "Let me see how many of you are finished. I will walk around and check your work. or, When you are finished you can . . . ."

(Cont'd) Table 1. A summary of some useless questions and their reformulation

Level of Use	Useless Question and Typical Answer	Possible Reformulation Strategy
Comprehension	**Question:** Do you understand? **Answer:** Everyone shouts out "yes."	*Use questions that include* compare, contrast, explain, rephrase, use your own words, interpret, predict, anticipate
Application	**Question:** Is that clear? **Answer:** Everyone shouts out "yes."	*Use questions that include* apply, show how, design, solve demonstrate, choose
Analysis	**Question:** Anything you don't understand? **Answer:** Confusion. The class is unsure whether to say "yes" or "no."	*Use questions that include* analyse, compare, contrast, identify, infer, distinguish
Synthesis	**Question:** Am I going too fast? **Answer:** Everyone shouts out "no."	*Use questions that include* create, design, plan, construct, illustrate, tell, suggest, formulate
Evaluation	**Question:** Do you understand? **Answer:** Everyone shouts out "yes."	*Use questions that include* judge, evaluate, your opinion, choose, determine, decide, assess

Conclusion

Understanding is a complex phenomenon that is multi-faceted and impossible to assess with a simple "Do you understand?" For teachers to gauge student conceptual knowledge they must either reformulate or retire useless questions and develop more purposely and comprehensive questioning strategies. Additionally, when teachers have a limited grasp of the concepts they are teaching they should devote more time to learning more about these subjects. Unless teachers eliminate useless questions from their repertoire they will waste valuable instructional time and promote incomplete or incorrect concept development in their students.

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